

## “Compassion for the Crowd”

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Scripture: Luke 6:17-28

Most years—and this year in particular—it seems such a short hop from birth to death. Weren't we just singing “Away in a Manger,” and “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come”? And so soon, in the twinkling of an eye, it was Ash Wednesday, and we were reminded of our own mortality and hope for eternal life with God. Now, three Lenten candles have already been put out. In three more weeks, we'll be waving palm fronds in a short-lived triumph, and then commemorating the last supper on Maundy Thursday. The mourning of Good Friday will be here before we know it.

If we take these transitions seriously, then we know a little of what it must have been like for the first disciples—how bewilderingly fast they must have gone, those three years with Jesus.

In the midst of these remembrances of the beginning and the end of Jesus' life, it's good also to recall the in-between, and especially to retell and rehear and re-imagine some of the world-altering events and upside-down messages of the ministry of the carpenter from Nazareth. What *was* Jesus up to between Christmas and Easter?

Today, we could go together to the Mount of the Beatitudes on the Sea of Galilee. We could be part of the crowd of disciples who first heard the Word.

In the gospel of Matthew, these words of Jesus that we're hearing today are known as the beginning of the “Sermon on the Mount”; in Luke, it's the “Sermon on the Plain.”

When we stand on the ground where these words were spoken, we see that those are both apt descriptions: we're on a long, sloping field that makes it way down to the lake's edge. Birds are skimming the surface of the water; jasmine and excitement fill the air.

The crowd is so very large. The man we have all come to hear begins speaking: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

He speaks for some time. The crowd is very quiet. We can all hear him.

Then, there are words that bring us up short:

*But woe to you who are rich; for you have received your consolation... Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry...*

Can we just step back into the Meeting House for a few minutes to talk about this?

“Woe to”... “Woe to”....whoa...what’s up with the “woes”?

I think, maybe this is the reason why 95% of the commentaries focus on Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount,” and not on Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain.” Matthew doesn’t do the “woes.”

All right, we know that, in the Hebrew Bible, this kind of juxtaposition of blessings and woes is part of a long tradition of the prophets. And we know that Jesus had some genuinely tough things to say in the name of justice. Still, the idea of Jesus raining down curses on his followers doesn’t sit well—doesn’t seem to fit with his compassion for sinners in many of the Gospel accounts.

And in this passage, even the blessings frankly don’t always sound so appealing:  
*“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”*

Jesus, Lord, with all due respect, I just want to say one thing...I want to say, perhaps you might want to revisit your recruitment strategy? I know where you’re coming from, but will this really appeal to your target market? With blessings like this one, who needs “woes”?

And some of those woes are more like “whoas” for us... *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”* What do you mean, Lord? It’s an okay life, but are you saying this is it? This is all there is? We don’t really know exactly what Jesus meant (or maybe we just don’t want to know), but frankly it doesn’t sound too good for us.

Luke tells us that Jesus was talking to a crowd of his disciples. “Ohhh,” we may say, “Maybe he was just talking to his followers on that day? Maybe Jesus held his disciples to higher standards than the rest of us? I mean, I didn’t sign up . . . Maybe that lets us off the hook? A bit?”

But, what if Jesus wasn’t concerned so much with putting people on or off the hook (although he did use a lot of fishing metaphors in his ministry)?

Some scholars translate the “woe to’s” in Luke as “alas”—a term more of sorrow than of cursing.

Jesus knew what it was to be human. What if he was not so much condemning as describing our lives? (Our lives— a sum of both the consequences of our own choices and the cycles of birth and death and rebirth that govern the earth?)

What if Jesus was saying “I see you and I know you?”

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Let's go back and listen, beside the Syrian sea, to what Jesus might—might--have been saying:

Old man, I see you and I know you. I know that those are the only clothes you have, and you were ashamed to wear that shirt today—it has so many holes. I know that you got up before dawn and walked so far to see me that your legs ache, and you have a blister on your left heel. You have so little, and you are giving up even the little that you have. The rest of your life will be rich; the kingdom of God will be richer. Old man, you are so dear to me. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

Little girl, I see you and I know you. I know that your mother sent you off today with one piece of bread. It smelled so good, and you wanted so badly to eat it right away, but you were saving it until you couldn't stand it any longer, you were so hungry. As you sat down and unwrapped it, you saw that the old man next to you had nothing to eat. He was looking at your piece of bread. You were so hungry, and you wanted to hide it, but you gave him half of your bread. And you are still hungry, and you are also proud of yourself. You know that your mother would be proud. Oh, little girl, I am proud of you too. *Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

My dear woman, I see you and I know you. You cry out for your husband—he died ten months and two days ago. You weep because you still wake up every morning thinking that he is beside you. You cannot imagine going on, but you go on. You cannot imagine laughing again, but you will laugh again. Oh, my dear, I put my arms around you now. *Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

Peter, my new friend, I see you and I know you. You are full of life and amazement and joy for this new great adventure. You are so eager, so sure, and so...often wrong. I know what you do not...that this journey we are embarking on together is going to test you. You will fail that test. You will fail me, and you will fail yourself. And later, when people hate you on my account, remember what I tell you today: *Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven.* Oh, I am with you 'til the end of the world. *Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.*

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*But woe to you who are rich; for you have received your consolation... Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry... Ah, you beautiful couple, I see you and I know you. You have no need of God; you can manage just fine, I know. You're just here to see what all the fuss is about. You have a basket full of food—why should you share it? You earned your wealth—others should do the same. It's a fine life, I know...but I also know what you will not let yourself know...you long inside for something more...there is an empty place in you that the world will never fill. Oh, my children, come home.*

*Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.*

Young couple, I see you and I know you. You giggle and plan. I love you for that. You love in spite of the knowledge that everyone who loves in this life loses. Smile and laugh today—another day, you will mourn and weep. And when you do, remember then what I say to you today: *“Blessed are those who weep...for you shall laugh.”*

*Woe to you when all speak well of you...*

Oh, my people. I see you and I know you. *You seek the admiration of this world. You store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

Oh, my people, life with God is the life you were meant to live. You are so dear to me. Come home. Remember who you are and whose you are. You belong to God, who loves you always.

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